

## AUSTRIA

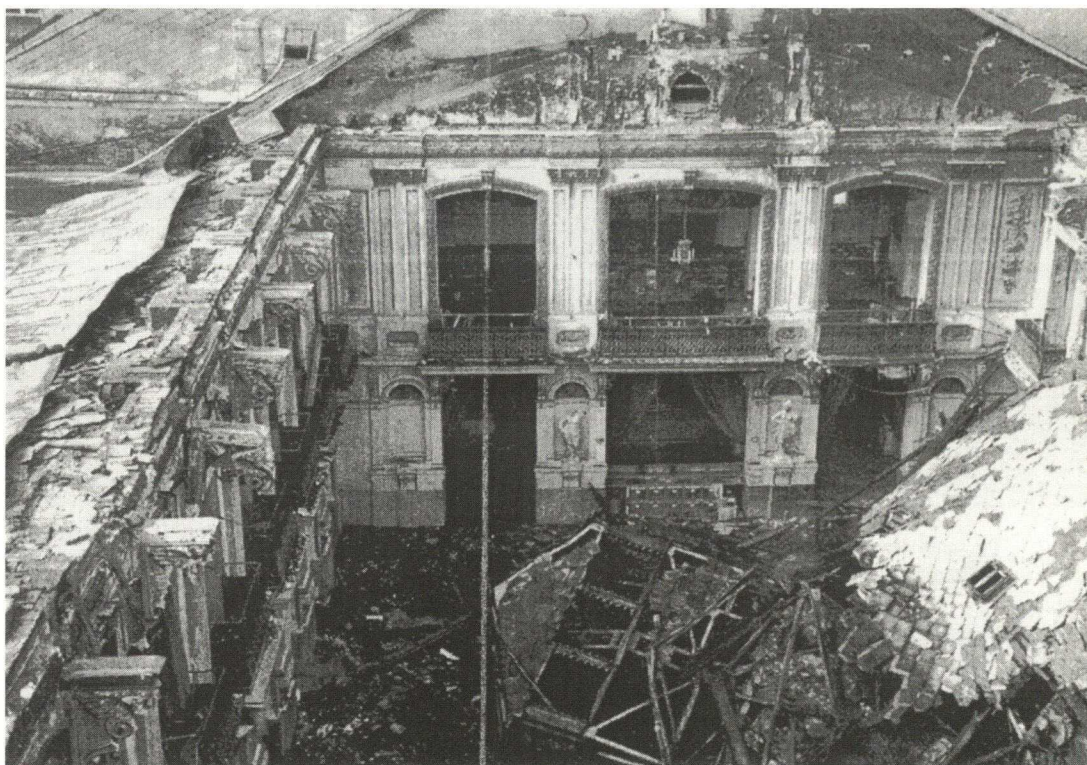
### Problems of restoring a burned-out ruin: Vienna's Sophiensäle

In August 2001 the complex of the Sophiensäle in Vienna was badly damaged by fire. The Sophiensäle have had a chequered past. In 1838 the draper Franz Morawetz opened a bathing establishment at this site which he named 'Sophienbad' after the Archduchess Sophie – mother of Emperor Franz Joseph. As the baths became very popular, a newer and larger complex was built to the plans of the architects Van der Nüll and Siccardsburg, who later became famous for the Vienna State Opera designs.

The multi-function hall served as a swimming pool in the summer and for various events in the winter, with a capacity for up to 2700 people and thus Vienna's largest indoor public space of its

Sophiensäle remained largely unaltered and intact, indeed all the others have disappeared entirely.

- Since the mid-19th century, the Sophiensäle have provided a venue not only for countless balls, concerts and theatrical performances but also for political, sporting and cultural events, thereby serving as a key site for Viennese social life.
- The cultural significance of this venue with its unique continuity is underscored by notable events such as concerts given by members of the Strauss family or premiere performances of Arthur Schnitzler's plays.
- The hall was intensively used for cultural and social events up to the present. It was also a popular location for music recordings, particularly favoured by the conductors Herbert von Karajan and Leonard Bernstein because of the excellent acoustics.



Vienna 'Sophiensäle': Great Hall after fire damage

day. The glazed roof supported by cast-iron elements was a technical innovation. In winter, the large swimming pool was drained and covered with a wooden floor construction.

Gradually, the swimming function diminished, and by 1870 the hall's side walls were redesigned to incorporate boxes and plaster ornament in the historical revival style. Large canvas 'sails', painted to imitate panelling with figurative ornaments, were stretched under the glass roof for improved acoustics. In 1898/99 the building's façade was remodelled in the Secessionist style. The repairs following damage incurred during World War II included extensive renovations of the entire building complex. The historic ceiling construction of the Great Hall was replaced with a steel construction to which the painted canvas sheets were permanently attached. Stage and staircases were modernised.

In 1986 the building was placed under monuments protection, based on the following reasons:

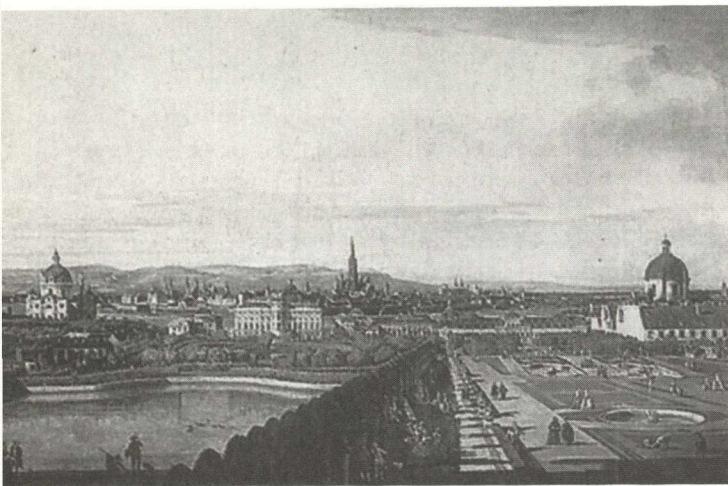
- Of the numerous dancing and entertainment establishments established in Vienna in the mid-19th century, only the

During the early 1990s, a hotel plan was developed that included maintaining the old hall for events; nothing came of this project.

#### 2001 Fire Damage

After the fire of 2001 there was immediate public discussion about the preservation of the surviving architectural remains and the possibility of rebuilding the historic Sophiensäle. However, the owner applied to have the monuments protection order repealed. On thorough examinations of the remaining building fragments, the protection order was maintained for the damaged walls of the hall with the argument that there is enough original substance remaining that, when repaired, will still transmit a sufficiently authentic image of the hall's historic appearance from its decoration around 1870, which will make it a recognisable and justifiable work of art. The painted ceiling that was destroyed by the fire was undoubtedly an integral part of the mid-19th-century decoration.





Canaletto's view of Vienna from Belvedere palace, c. 1760



The same view with the originally projected Wien-Mitte towers (*Die Presse*, 23 February 2002)

Vienna, computer simulation of the Wien-Mitte project



However, its loss should not be valued so highly that without it the remaining parts of the hall could not adequately transmit the splendour of a ballroom with fine-quality decoration in the historical revival style of 1870.

The monuments preservation experts came to the conclusion that the criteria of the historical and cultural significance of the building do not require a complete preservation of the historic atmosphere, but rather the more expressive fragments and/or later alterations can be implemented, as long as the depleted earlier features can authenticate its original identity. In any event, the remaining parts of the building provide documentary testimony for the site and for the era that established its historical and cultural significance. The site's owner has appealed against the Federal Office of Historic Monuments decision. The case is still pending (August 2002), and its outcome will be of benchmark significance for the preservation of witnesses to cultural history of the past.

The fire at the Sophiensäle sparked a wide-scale public reaction, and a citizens' action group is supporting the preservation scheme. According to the Austrian Monuments Preservation Law, re-construction cannot be ordered, only the maintenance of existing remnants can be required. The City of Vienna has imposed a temporary halt to building works. In the future, intensive negotiations and some form of governmental financial support will be necessary to find a solution to not only safeguard the interests of monuments preservation for the building parts that survived the fire, but also the revitalisation of the complex, which would be in the interest of a large segment of the general public.

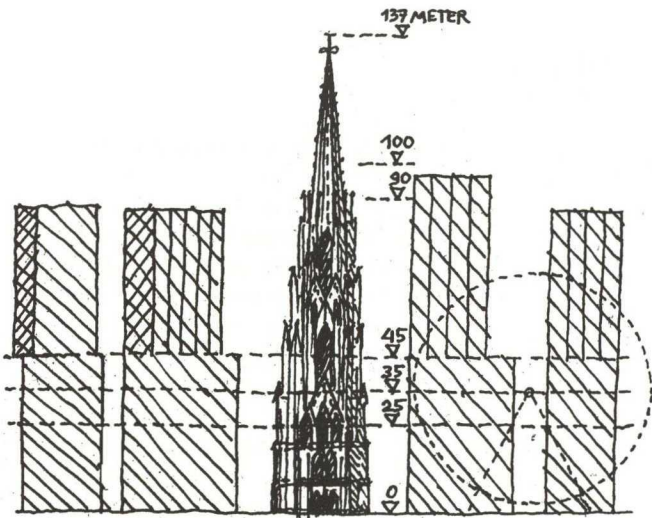
Eva Maria Höhle  
ICOMOS Austria

### The Wien-Mitte Project as Threat to the World Heritage Site "Historic Centre of Vienna"

After a long planning phase to redevelop the area around the Wien-Mitte station a model by the architects Ortner & Ortner, Neumann & Partner and Lintl & Lintl for building over the station was presented in August 2002 at Vienna's Centre of Architecture. Their plans for an area of 85.000 square metres included a cluster of four (originally six) high-rise buildings, of which the highest with 97 metres was meant to be erected directly along the Landstrasser Hauptstrasse, the main axis of this quarter. Right from the beginning several initiatives protested against this project. Apart from the height of the towers, which they saw as a threat to the old town's silhouette, there was also concern about the high density of the block in the lower sections and the lack of architectural and urban quality. The construction site lies inside the buffer zone of the centre of Vienna, a unique ensemble which became a World Heritage site in 2001. The Ringstrasse, a splendid boulevard begun in the middle of the 19th century, follows the outline of the mediaeval city wall and encircles the centre, which developed from a Roman settlement. The St Stephen's Cathedral, topographical and spiritual centre of the city, is the highest building in the World Heritage zone. The Wien-Mitte construction site is approximately 800 metres away from the cathedral.

Already at its meeting in Helsinki in December 2001 the World Heritage Committee had recommended in connection with the registration of the "Historic Centre of Vienna" in the World Heritage list "that the state party undertake the necessary measures to review the height and volumes of the proposed new development near the Stadtpark, east of the Ringstrasse, so as not to impair the visual integrity of the town". As the City of Vienna nonetheless





Drawing showing a comparison of heights between St Stephen's cathedral and the Wien-Mitte towers (*Spectrum*, 21 December 2002)

continued to speed up the prerequisites for a realisation of this project, the World Heritage Committee at its next session in Budapest in June 2002 expressed "its serious concern about the Wien-Mitte urban development project, adjacent to the World Heritage site of Vienna and located in the buffer zone of the site, and in particular about the architectural solutions and the height of the proposed towers". The demand to revise the Wien-Mitte project and the wish to improve in total the basic conditions for the protection and care of the historic building stock in the World Heritage zone were connected with clear advice that without an acceptable solution the process of delisting the site Historic Centre of Vienna would be unavoidable.

The report by the City of Vienna presented for 1 October 2002 did not meet the requests and recommendations of the World Heritage Committee and was therefore criticised by ICOMOS in a comprehensive expert opinion. Thanks to the great commitment of journalists, experts and citizens' initiatives the controversial Wien-Mitte project continued to be publicly discussed, and in its statement of February 2003 ICOMOS Austria asked for "an architectural concept according to the principles of context and dialogue with the traditional structures of the World Heritage zones. This calls for a suitable proportion in mass, volume and height. The vertical dimension in height represented by the Hilton complex should be considered as a focus of orientation, whereby the mass and volume of construction are to be articulated according to the principles of an architectural dialogue with the environment".

In a "First Interim Report" of March 2003 dealing with ICOMOS' criticism the City of Vienna has finally promised to make a number of improvements in accordance with the recommendations of Budapest, for example new guidelines for planning and assessing high-rise building projects, restrictions on roof extensions within the areas covered by the World Heritage sites, an accelerated listing of the historic buildings of the old town, intensified cooperation between the municipal's Department for Architecture and Urban Design (MA19) and the Federal Office for the Preservation of Monuments (Bundesdenkmalamt). However, the decisive breakthrough came in mid-March when the Mayor Dr. Michael Häupl stated publicly that "Wien-Mitte will not be built in this way" (*Die Presse*, 14 March 2003). After the Wien-Mitte project with its three towers is finally "dead", the BAI (Bauträger Austria Immobilien) intends to realise a "light version". Even if the construction of the fourth tower, the 87-metre City-Tower in the

Marxergasse, which was planned in connection with the project, is almost finished and will have to be accepted as a great mistake of urban planning, there is hope that a project of not more than 60–70 metres height will be developed that will thus not be higher than the nearby Hilton Hotel and be more compatible with the surrounding World Heritage zone. The cancellation of the Wien-Mitte project, which was due to the firm position of the World Heritage Committee and the World Heritage Centre, is also proof of the moral power of the World Heritage Convention.

## The World Heritage Sites of Graz and Salzburg

In the surroundings of the two other Austrian town ensembles on the World Heritage list, Salzburg and Graz, various projects for new buildings have also been cause for concern. In Salzburg there are plans for high-rise buildings near the central station, which, however, have in the meantime been considerably reduced due to the controversies concerning Wien-Mitte.

Following the suggestions made by ICOMOS Austria in March 2003 the intended building-over of the Thalia complex in Graz will need to be reworked in order to show more respect for the urban situation. Above the Thalia complex, which includes the listed Thalia cinema from 1956, a new rehearsal stage and a hotel with 200 beds are planned. The latter's simple cube would be highly disturbing as a counterpart to the Graz opera house, built in 1899 by the well-known theatre architects Fellner and Helmer.

ICOMOS Austria

Model of Vienna with St Stephen's cathedral in the foreground and the Wien-Mitte towers in the background (*Die Presse*, 6 September 2002)

